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Fathers' Contribution to Children's Early Literacy Development: The Relationship of Marital Role Functions[1]

Robert W. Ortiz

Robert W. Ortiz, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Special Education/Communication Disorders Dept. at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, NM.

Because literacy skills are essential components of academic success, many researchers have sought to isolate early literacy factors that are associated with reading achievement (Cazden, 1988; Taylor, 1983; Rogoff, 1990). Correlational and longitudinal studies completed in home settings have shown that frequency of parent-child reading during the preschool years is an important determinant of children's readiness to benefit from formal literacy instruction (Chomsky, 1970; Clark, 1975; Goldfield & Snow, 1984; Wells, 1985a, 1985b).

Much of the research on parents' contribution to their children's early literacy development focuses on mother-child interaction, for example, the purchase of children's reading and writing materials, story book reading, and assisting children with school assignments (National Academy of Sciences, 1982; Dickinson, De Temple, & Smith, 1992; Ninio, 1980, 1983; Pellegrini, Perlmutter, Galda, & Brody, 1990; Williams, 1991). Fathers' contributions to early literacy experiences have not been thoroughly examined. Even less is known about fathers' roles across different ethnic and cultural settings. This report examines early literacy interactions of Mexican American fathers and their children and the relationship of marital role function as an influential factor in these activities.

In this exploratory study, statistical analysis indicated that demographic variables, such as generation status, education, and income of the father have a minimal relationship with joint parent-child early literacy events. A post-hoc analysis of interview transcripts suggested one unanticipated factor that differentiated Mexican American fathers who reported engaging in early literacy practices. This procedure suggested that fathers who shared child rearing duties with their spouses, as opposed to dividing these tasks, were more likely to engage in reading and writing activities with their children. Initial indications that this process reflected differential paternal involvement in these events were recognized during a pilot study when fathers often emphasized the extent to which they assumed child care responsibilities. Thus, by focusing on individual differences, a more plausible way that Mexican American fathers mediate differential literacy activity was identified.

Methods

Sample. With the assistance of school principals and teachers, letters describing the study and a request for volunteers were sent home with children who were enrolled in Kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grades. Fathers returning the response forms were subsequently contacted by phone, and interview appointments were scheduled at that time. The initial target sample consisted of 35 fathers. Nine parents were included in a

pilot study. The remainder of the sample consisted of 26 fathers representing four generation groups (2nd=11; 3rd=10; 4th=2; 5th=3). Socioeconomic status, based on education and occupation status, included 15 working and 11 middle-class parents (adapted from Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958, *Two-Factor Index of Social Position*). Fathers' occupations ranged from unskilled labor such as custodian to managerial positions within hospitals and other health related fields. The majority of fathers (58%, N=15) were employed, primarily, in semiskilled and skilled jobs as warehousemen, plumbers, and utility company technicians. Fathers' ages ranged from 25 to 45 with a mean age of 35 (SD=5.33). Fathers' educational level varied from junior high to completion of graduate school. The majority of fathers (80%, N=21) had some college or post high school educational experience (e.g., trade school). Ethnically, 12 (46%) of the parents referred to themselves as Mexican American, 7 (27%) as Hispanic, 1 (4%) as Latino, 2 (8%) as American, and 4 (15%) as other.

Finally, relative to language spoken, although all fathers reported English and Spanish fluency, 17 (65%) preferred English, 2 (8%) preferred Spanish, and 7 (27%) had no preference. All fathers chose to have the questionnaire administered in English.

Procedures. Data were collected through questionnaire interviews, document analysis (e.g., homework assignments, personal letters, etc.), supplemental checklists, and survey of print and other literacy materials found within the home. A 60 item questionnaire was developed by reviewing literature on Hispanic/Latino family variables that have been found to affect literacy activity. Information obtained from fathers was based on self-report statements. The questionnaire was formatted with open-ended questions, yes-no responses, and Likert-type scales, and was divided into two sections. Section I contained 40 items on demographic and family background factors. Section II contained 20 items describing paternal early literacy activity engaged in within and outside the home setting. Questions on fathers' reading and writing experiences with their children focused on specific context or subject areas, for example, *Do you read with your child outside the home for recreational (or academic, religious , etc.) purposes? (y/n). If yes, how often (Range= once-a-year to daily). Do you write things at home with your child that are related to school (or religion, library, etc.)? (y/n). If yes, how often (Range= once -a-year to daily). Why do you read/write with your child on subjects related to school (or church, work, recreation , etc.)?*

Examined context areas included reading and writing related to occupation, school, religion, recreation, and other.

Description of Shared and Divided Father Function Groups

Twenty six fathers were divided into two groups consisting of 14 shared and 12 divided function parents. Shared function fathers, for the most part, shared child care responsibilities with their spouses, while divided function fathers tended to divide these tasks with their wives; for example, child care duties were assumed only by the mother or father. Group assignment was determined based on whether fathers shared or divided three intimate child care responsibilities: nutrition, hygiene, and illness. Five additional child care duties were also examined: school, recreation, religion, discipline, and creative activities.

Mothers as primary caretakers who carry out intimate child care duties, such as bathing and feeding children, while fathers oversee more traditional, male-oriented responsibilities (e.g., discipline) is generally presumed to be an Hispanic/Latino, cultural characteristic (Kutsche, 1983; Zavella, 1987; Martinez, 1988). Dividing the sample into two groups was a decision I made based on this traditional gender role orientation found in research and on an almost equal division of fathers in the study participating in intimate child care duties with their spousesa phenomenon suggesting movement away from strict gender role assignment.

Thus, fathers who reported sharing in two of the three intimate child care tasks were placed in the shared group, while fathers who divided two of the three duties were assigned to the divided category. No significant differences were found between shared and divided function fathers on the remaining five nonintimate child care duties (i.e., school, recreation, religion, discipline, and creative activities).

Results

Function group and child care responsibility

Tables 1 and 2 highlight child care duties engaged in by shared and divided function fathers. The data in Table 1, the shared function group, indicate that fathers share in most of the eight child rearing duties with their spouses, with high paternal involvement in the three intimate child care tasks (hygiene, nutrition, and illness). Shared function fathers were least likely to be involved in creative activities (e.g., arts and crafts, use of tools to make objects, pottery making, etc.). Divided function fathers (Table 2), on the other hand, were least likely to engage in intimate child care duties and were involved in more traditional, male oriented type responsibilities, such as discipline and recreation. To reiterate, fathers were grouped based on their sharing (or dividing) of at least two of the three intimate child care responsibilities. Although some divided function fathers took sole responsibility for certain intimate child care tasks, such as fathers #15 and #29 in Table 2, the criterion for group assignment was *joint* parental involvement in these responsibilities.

Function Group and Paternal Early Literacy Interaction

Statistical analysis indicated a significant difference ($t=2.40$, $p<.05$) in overall *frequency* of early literacy activity engaged in between the two groups of fathers; shared function parents read and wrote with their children more often than divided function parents. Additionally, although statistically nonsignificant, when compared with divided function fathers, there was a trend for shared function fathers to read and write with their children in all *context* areas. Work related writing activity was the only *context* area where shared function fathers did not exceed divided function parents. Last, from a comparison of mean differences, shared function fathers were found to have acquired more adult reading materials (e.g., novels, reference materials, magazines, etc.) ($t=4.79$, $p<.01$) and children's literature ($p<$ns) in the home than divided function fathers.

Thus, there was a tendency for shared function fathers not only to read and write more often with their children in a variety of subject areas but to acquire more reading materials in the home as well. What characteristics, then, distinguish these two groups of fathers? How are the two function groups related to child rearing practices, in general, and early literacy experiences, in particular?

Descriptive Analysis of the Two Function Groups

Child Care Duties and Father's Role

Shared function fathers. Researchers point out that many more fathers are involved now with child care duties than in past decades (Russell & Radin, 1983; Lamb, 1976, 1987; Lewis & Weintraub, 1976; Radin & Russell, 1983). Various reasons have been suggested for this change in family structure, for example, more mothers entering the work force, the women's movement, and a rising consciousness in equitable task assignments by both parents. Two themes were often expressed by shared function parents as reasons for participation in child care activities: *responsibility* and *equity*. Shared function fathers often reported that they had a responsibility in the upbringing of their children since, as one father stated, "We both decided to

bring a child into this world, therefore, it's both our responsibility to raise him." Accompanying this feeling of responsibility to the family was the issue of equity. Because child rearing encompasses a myriad of activities and responsibilities, fathers reported they often discussed with their spouse the sharing of these duties. Fathers viewed themselves as having a responsibility to see to it that child care duties were not assumed by one member of the family. For example, this father, who is employed with a utility company, addressed the issue of equal task engagement between him and his wife: "It's not really a conscious decision. She works. I work. We're both tired. One of us comes home, starts cooking. It's usually her. She gets home before I do. One of us cleans the kitchen, and the other gives the kids a bath. I can't expect her to do everything while I sit back, drink a beer, and watch TV."

Another father, a lab manager for a dental clinic, advocating the sharing of child care responsibilities, stated, "Generally, what happens is she'll cook and wash, and I'll bathe the kids and make sure that Bobby [pseudonym] does his homework, and then vice versa. I say to my wife, 'Hon, you go ahead and bathe them, and I'll clean the kitchen,' so one parent isn't burdened with all the load. It's equal distribution."

Finally, a father who was raised in a traditional Mexican household, where he reported that all child care duties were assumed by his mother, commented on his own marital relationship: "We must share the responsibility. It wouldn't be fair, actually, for the child if either one of us took sole responsibility working with the kid." This father is a real estate agent at a brokerage company and an office manager at a major metropolitan hospital.

Divided Function Fathers. Divided function fathers tended to assume child care responsibilities based on traditional gender role beliefs and background experience. For example, employment status often played a role in which child care tasks parents assumed. Although nearly as many wives of shared function fathers were unemployed, divided function fathers commonly used their spouses' unemployment status as a reason not to engage in child care duties. Fathers often commented that spouses who were not employed outside the home had time to assume child related chores, thus freeing them of such responsibilities. One father, a carpenter for a utility company, stated, "I work more. My wife doesn't work. She's home." Another father, a technician for an aircraft plant, expressed a similar response, "She doesn't work. My wife takes care of her [target child], cleaning up, and eating. I'm not here at home." Finally, one father, an office manager at a medical clinic serving primarily low income, immigrant Hispanic/Latino families, stated, "I don't have too much time for my daughter. My wife doesn't work. She has the time to do those things."

Background experience was also found to be related to task allocation. This may include fathers assuming recreational duties because of their athletic abilities and experiences or mothers overseeing children's nutritional needs because of their knowledge in preparing meals. For many of these fathers, task allocation may have roots founded on traditional gender role beliefs; comments often emerged acknowledging that parents who had skills and talents in an area should pass on this knowledge to the child, irrespective of which parent acquired the skill. As a case in point, traditional female duties such as bathing and feeding children were assumed by some divided function fathers because they viewed themselves as, "better suited for the task." These fathers were not at all reluctant in reporting participation in traditional women's work, as they were concerned in addressing a need; that their children receive proper care and training. For example, one father, a truck driver for a major super market, commented on why child care duties were divided between him and his wife. On the issue of religious upbringing, the father stated, "She [mother] had more of a stronger religious upbringing than I did." On the subject of recreation: "Me, I'm more sports active. I've even taught my son golf." On nutrition: "I feel my son is too thin. So, I tend to make sure he eats the proper vegetables. [I] make sure he eats three times a day. [I] make sure he's not a junk food junkie. I'm more concerned [than my wife]." On discipline: "I'm the authority in the house. PERIOD! The children tend to be

intimidated more by me." And on illness: "She [mother] is a little more tender in that area."

Thus, the tendency was for divided function fathers not to be as concerned in pooling experiences and sharing this knowledge with the child, as many shared function parents had done. Instead, emphasis was placed on identifying which parent was more experienced (i.e., strengths vs. weaknesses) and using that knowledge to indoctrinate the child.

Early Literacy Practices and Father's Role

Shared function fathers. Many shared function fathers reported that they viewed literacy as an activity that brought the family together. Fathers often encouraged and participated in reading and writing practices for religious, academic, and recreational purposes. Fathers often spoke of both short and long term goals associated with family readings, with children viewed as both contributors and recipients of the activities' benefits. For example, one father used family reading time to engage in religious literacy activities at home. Family members gathered together and read the Bible and other materials three to four times a week. Their daughter, who is in kindergarten, was encouraged to read along, and, oftentimes, was asked to recite simple Bible passages. Not only did the father view this activity as a means of teaching their daughter to read but also as a way to indoctrinate the child in religious practices congruent with familial beliefs. The father stated, "The reason we read together is mostly because it's a time to spend together with each other. There have been times, though, that Caira [pseudonym] has said, 'I want to read,' and we'll let her read. It's a kind of 'everybody participating' thing."Bonding was another benefit many shared function fathers reported as an incentive in engaging in early literacy practices. One parent, with a daughter in kindergarten, stated, "it would be the closeness that comes with it [joint literacy], you know. There's a relationship, a bonding in a sense." This parent read story books to his daughter three times a week.

Another father, whose son was in first grade, expressed similar comments on spending contact time with his children. This father read to his children every night. "The time is so precious that I spend with the kids at all. It's minimal. Working eight to ten hours sometimes. I come home and go through this regimen of doing dishes, eating, getting the kids bathed, doing homework, so, just to spend time with them and not say 'get out of here.'"

Last, shared function parents often attributed their participation in early literacy practices to events that had affected their lives as childrena finding similar to that of Leichter's (1984) studies on parent-child interactions. One shared function parent, with a son in first grade, recalled his childhood memories: "I would see him [his father], and he really wouldn't read that much. He'd watch TV. Oh, he would read the paper and all, but not really a lot more. He worked his ass off. I could see where he would want to kick back when he got home." The father continues, "I do all these things [joint literacy] because I understand the importance of education. And, I understand the importance of being literate. So with Billy [pseudonym], that's what I try and do. I try to limit the TV I watch and definitely what he watches. [I] make sure he sees my wife and me reading a book or magazine."

Another father, whose child is in first grade, recalled the difficulty he had as a student in school, "I want her [target child] to really know she is going to learn a lot if she continues in reading. She won't be bored of it at school like, at times, my education was when I was little. . . .I didn't realize as much until now how hard education is, and if you can do it now, you better do it." This father, who enjoys reading story books to his children everyday, reported that early literacy activity was a way to encourage them to, "get into the habit of reading."

Divided function fathers. Divided function fathers, as mentioned earlier, engaged in fewer early literacy practices than shared function parents. Identifying factors that would explain this phenomenon was difficult. There was a tendency, though, as with shared function parents, for divided function parents to report on past experiences that had affected their present beliefs on literacy practices. Although shared and divided function fathers recounted both positive and negative experiences regarding their own literacy development, divided function parents were less likely to describe opportunities they may have had to reflect on these events and to apply newly gained knowledge to change their current reading and writing habits.

Divided function parents also tended to view the purpose of literacy within limited parameters. During interviews, fathers often found it difficult to explain or to elaborate as to why they spent time with their children. For example, when responding to open-ended questions on joint early literacy activities, fathers' answers were often on a practical level, with many parents limiting their statements to, "[Literacy is] a useful tool that was good for learning" and "My child will eventually learn to read and write." Rarely did these fathers discuss the potential impact that reading and writing would have on their children's future. Joint father-child early literacy activities were pragmatic experiences at best. That is, divided function fathers often read to their children literature that they themselves were interested in, such as hot rod and motorcycle magazines, the Recycler, and car repair manuals.

Although divided function fathers allocated chunks of time to interacting with their children, most activities were often of a nonliteracy nature, such as discipline and sports. This is not to say that these fathers held low educational values for their children relative to reading and writing. On the contrary, on a separate analysis of their beliefs toward education, both shared and divided function parents indicated they had high aspirations for their children's academic success. For example, all fathers in the sample stated that completing homework assignments and school related work was necessary for academic success. Divided function parents were extremely concerned with their children's progress in academics and helped with homework assignments. Divided function fathers, though, generally expressed the belief that school related activity was their spouse's responsibility, and would get involved only if the mother were busy with other important tasks. These attitudes may not be consistent with current practices, since fathers from both function groups reported engaging in *school* related early literacy practices on an almost equal basis.

Discussion

This was an exploratory study using a quantitative and descriptive approach to analyze father-child early literacy interactions. Not surprisingly, all fathers in the sample reported some degree of early literacy involvement with their children. However, when controlling for marital role functions, participation in early literacy practices varied significantly. The findings suggest that fathers who share child care duties with their spouses read and write more often with their children than parents who divide these tasks. These shared function fathers also acquire more adult and children's literature in the home as well. Why? What accounts for differences in early literacy practices based on marital role function? One reason may be that a secondary effect is taking place. Since shared function fathers are assuming responsibility for a number of child related duties, an additional task, such as joint father-child early literacy, would not dramatically change established daily routines and practices. The participation of family members in various child care activities occurs because it serves familial purposes in the overall schema of task assignments and performance (Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989).

Another reason for increased paternal early literacy activity among shared function fathers is that this group of parents consists of an unusually high number of readers and/or writers who regularly model literacy practices at home. Children often seek their parents' attention by emulating their actions. Parents who read at

home may stimulate a curiosity in their children. This in turn, may set into motion a chain of events that children can readily observe and participate in. Observing the interest their children show in wanting to read and write, parents then negotiate and modify daily schedules to accommodate these activities (Gallimore et al., 1989; Gallimore, Weisner, Guthrie, Bernheimer, & Nihira, in press; Weisner, Garnier, & Loucky, in press). Care must be taken though in interpreting these results. While it seems logical to conclude that fathers modeling literacy activity leads to parent-child interaction, the direction of causality is less clear cut. Is the increase in joint father-child literacy a result of fathers initiating the activity with the child, or is it the curious child, wanting to know the meaning of text, who approaches the parent? Or is it a combination of both factors? More research is needed in this area to tease apart these factors.

Shared function fathers may also see the advantagesand immediacyin their children becoming literate individuals. Divided function fathers, as reported, found it difficult to describe or expand on the impact that literacy skills would have on their children's lives. These parents may be unaware of the long term advantages of developing reading and writing skills. They may not see a relationship between literacy proficiency and its ramifications on major areas of life, for example occupation and schooling, or if they do, choose not to capitalize on this knowledge. Moreover, there was a slight nonsignificant trend for shared function parents to consist of later generations (i.e., 3rd and 4th). Newly arrived immigrant families may enter the U.S. with less formal education and familiarity with the English language (Goldenberg, 1987; Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1991; Hayes-Bautista, 1990; Reese, 1992), thus, impeding the process of assisting their children with schooland homebased literacy practices common to this society.

Last, shared function fathers may be influenced by their spouses to engage in early literacy activities. Although maternal participation in their children's literacy development was not examined here, it may be that wives of shared function fathers are more insistent that their husbands spend time with the children. This is plausible, since many shared function fathers commented that they were encouraged by their wives to volunteer for this study.

Implications of Father-Child Early Literacy Interactions

The development of literacy skills can occur in a myriad of contexts and situations. It can take place within a formal setting, such as a classroom or informally, as in the spelling of a street sign. As more and more fathers assume child care duties, for example supervising, bathing, and feeding their young children (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987), why not share with them text and print knowledge? By taking advantage of the many potential learning opportunities that arise from engaging in daily activities with their children, fathers are in a position to contribute to the development of their children's early literacy skills.

Several important implications immediately arise from these father-child early literacy interactions. First, *Academically*, school-based programs addressing poor student reading and/or writing performance should consider paternal involvement as a remedial planning strategy. Father-child interactions in their many and varied forms can be useful tools in addressing specific areas of literacy learning. For example, teachers can assist fathers in identifying myriad opportunities to involve children in home-based reading and writing experiences such as spelling print on household products or jotting down notes on home repair projects, grocery lists, and phone messages. Fathers can tutor their children in simple sentence construction, word comprehension, and writing techniques. Exposing children to print and text need not be limited to academically related materials. Fathers can serve as literacy role models for their children by reading articles and stories to them from the daily newspaper or children's magazines. They can share with the child information that is listed on game products or video boxes. Fathers can be encouraged not only to attend PTA, open house, and other school meetings but to explain to their children the purpose of these events

through printed materials such as notices, letters, and flyers. And second, as a *parent,* there needs to be a reevaluation of the father's role within the family unit. Though children's early exposure to reading and writing experiences may have traditionally been viewed as a mother's responsibility, they must now be accepted as tasks engaged in by both parents. Fathers can no longer assume that spouses have the time or the energy to devote to full-time parent-child learning interactions. Many families are two income households which, in and of itself, may demand a reevaluation of parental roles, thus leading to a more equitable distribution of child care duties. The child's family is the most important influence on that child, and to expect children to develop literacy skills parents must be actively involved in their learning. As Tharp and Gallimore (1991) have stressed in their research on early literacy development of children from varied cultural backgrounds, "Parents. . . can enhance language and literacy development if they respond to children's early reading and writing attempts" (p 104).

Parents can become an important resource in their children's literacy and academic development. We need not accept the premise that because the child is outside the confines of the school setting that learning ceases as a function of that environment. We must take every opportunity to instill in our children the belief that learning can and does occur in a multitude of settings and contexts, with both parents assuming lead roles in this responsibility.

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